

Prologue

THE WOMAN ON HESTER STREET

1969

Varya

Varya is thirteen.

New to her are three more inches of height and the dark patch of fur between her legs. Her breasts are palm-sized, her nipples pink dimes. Her hair is waist-length and medium brown—not the black of her brother Daniel’s or Simon’s lemon curls, not Klara’s glint of bronze. In the morning, she plaits it in two French braids; she likes the way they whisk her waist, like horses’ tails. Her tiny nose is no one’s, or so she thinks. By twenty, it will have risen to assume its full, hawkish majesty: her mother’s nose. But not yet.

They wind through the neighborhood, all four of them: Varya, the eldest; Daniel, eleven; Klara, nine; and Simon, seven. Daniel leads the way, taking them down Clinton to Delancey, turning left at Forsyth. They walk the perimeter of Sara D. Roosevelt Park, keeping to the shade beneath the trees. At night, the park turns rowdy, but on this Tuesday morning there are only a few clumps of young people sleeping off the previous weekend’s protests, their cheeks pressed to the grass.

At Hester, the siblings become quiet. Here they must pass Gold’s Tailor and Dressmaking, which their father owns, and though it is not likely he’ll see them—Saul works with total absorption, as if what he is sewing is not the hem of a men’s pant leg but the fabric of

the universe—he is still a threat to the magic of this muggy July day and its precarious, trembling object, which they have come to Hester Street to find.

Though Simon is the youngest, he’s quick. He wears a pair of handed-down jean shorts from Daniel, which fit Daniel at the same age but sag around Simon’s narrow waist. In one hand, he carries a drawstring bag, made of a chinoiserie fabric. Inside, dollar bills rustle and coins shimmy their tin music.

“Where is this place?” he asks.

“I think it’s right here,” Daniel says.

They look up at the old building—at the zigzag of the fire escapes and the dark, rectangular windows of the fifth floor, where the person they have come to see is said to reside.

“How do we get inside?” Varya asks.

It looks remarkably like their apartment building, except that it’s painted cream instead of brown, with five floors instead of seven.

“I guess we ring the buzzer,” Daniel says. “The buzzer for the fifth floor.”

“Yeah,” says Klara, “but which number?”

Daniel pulls a crumpled receipt out of his back pocket. When he looks up, his face is pink. “I’m not sure.”

“Daniel!” Varya leans against the wall of the building and flaps a hand in front of her face. It’s nearly ninety degrees, hot enough for her hairline to itch with sweat and her skirt to stick to her thighs.

“Wait,” Daniel says. “Let me think for a second.”

Simon sits down on the asphalt; the drawstring purse sags, like a jellyfish, between his legs. Klara pulls a piece of taffy from her pocket. Before she can finish chewing, the door to the

building opens, and a young man walks out. He wears purple-tinged glasses and an unbuttoned paisley shirt.

He nods at the Golds. “You want in?”

“Yes,” says Daniel. “We do,” and he is scrambling to his feet as the others follow him, he is walking inside and thanking the man with the purple glasses as the door shudders shut— Daniel, their fearless, half-inept leader, whose idea this was.

#

He heard two boys talking last week while in line for the kosher Chinese at Shmulke Bernstein’s, where he intended to get one of the warm egg custard tarts he loves to eat even in the heat. The line was long, the fans whirring at top speed, so he had to lean forward to listen to the boys and what they said about the woman who had taken up temporary residency at the top of a building on Hester Street.

As he walked back to 72 Clinton, Daniel’s heart skipped in his chest like a rock. In the bedroom, Klara and Simon were playing Chutes and Ladders on the floor while Varya read a book in her top bunk. Zoya, the black-and-white cat, lay on the radiator in a square frame of sun.

Daniel laid it out for them, his plan.

“I don’t understand.” Varya propped a dirty foot up on the ceiling. “What exactly does this woman *do*?”

“I told you.” Daniel was hyper, impatient. “She has powers.”

“Like what?” asked Klara, moving her game piece. She spent the first part of the summer teaching herself Houdini’s rubber band card trick, with limited success.

“What I heard,” said Daniel, “is she can tell fortunes. What’ll happen in your life—whether you’ll have a good one or a bad one. And there’s something else.” He braced his hands in the doorframe and leaned in. “She can say when you’ll die.”

Klara looked up.

“That’s ridiculous,” said Varya. “Nobody can say that.”

“And what if they could?” asked Daniel.

“Then I wouldn’t want to know.”

“Why not?”

“Because.” Varya put her book down and sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bunk. “What if it’s bad news? What if she says you’ll die before you’re even a grown up?”

“Then it’d be better to know,” said Daniel. “So you could get everything done before.”

There was a beat of silence. Then Simon began to laugh, his bird’s body fluttering. Daniel’s face deepened in color.

“I’m serious,” he said. “I’m going. I can’t take another day in this apartment. I refuse. So who the hell is coming with me?”

Perhaps nothing would have happened were it not the pit of summer, with a month and a half of humid boredom behind them and a month and a half ahead. There is no air conditioning in the apartment, and this year—the summer of 1969—it seems something is happening to everyone but them. People are getting wasted at Woodstock and singing Pinball Wizard and watching *Midnight Cowboy*, which none of the Gold children are allowed to see. They’re rioting outside Stonewall, ramming the doors with uprooted parking meters, smashing windows and jukeboxes. They’re being murdered in the most gruesome way imaginable, with chemical explosives and guns that can fire five hundred and fifty bullets in succession, their faces

transmitted with horrifying immediacy to the television in the Golds' kitchen. "They're walking on the motherfucking *moon*," said Daniel, who has begun to use this sort of language, but only at a safe remove from their mother. James Earl Ray is sentenced, and so is Sirhan Sirhan, and all the while the Golds play jacks or darts or rescue Zoya from an open pipe behind the oven, which she seems convinced is her rightful home.

But something else created the atmosphere required for this pilgrimage: they are siblings, this summer, in a way they will never be again. Next year, Varya will go to the Catskills with her friend Aviva. Daniel will be immersed in the private rituals of the neighborhood boys, leaving Klara and Simon to their own devices. In 1969, though, they are still a unit, yoked as if it isn't possible to be anything else.

"I'll do it," said Klara.

"Me too," Simon said.

"So how do we get an appointment with her?" asked Varya, who knew, by thirteen, that nothing comes for free. "What does she charge?"

Daniel frowned. "I'll find out."

#

So this is how it started: as a secret, a challenge, a fire escape they used to dodge the hulking mass of their mother, who demanded that they hang laundry or get the goddamn cat out of the stovepipe whenever she found them lounging in the bunk room. The Gold children asked around. The owner of a magic shop in Chinatown had heard of the woman on Hester Street. She was a nomad, he told Klara, traveling around the country, doing her work. Before Klara left, the

owner held up one finger, disappeared into a back aisle and returned with a large, square tome called *The Book of Divination*. Its cover showed twelve open eyes surrounded by symbols. Klara paid sixty-five cents and hugged it on the walk home.

Some of the other residents at 72 Clinton Street knew of the woman, too. Mrs. Blumenstein met her in the '50s at a fabulous party, she told Simon. She let her schnauzer out to the front stoop, where Simon sat, and where the dog promptly produced a pellet-sized turd of which Mrs. Blumenstein did not dispose.

"She read my palm. She said I would have a very long life," Mrs. Blumenstein said, leaning forward for emphasis. Simon held his breath: Mrs. Blumenstein's own breath smelled stale, as if she were exhaling the same ninety-year-old air she had inhaled as a baby. "And do you know, my dear, she was right."

The Hindu family on the 6th floor called the woman a *rishika*, a seer. Varya wrapped a piece of Gertie's kugel in foil and brought it to Ruby Singh, her classmate at P.S. 42, in return for a plate of spiced butter chicken. They ate on the fire escape as the sun went down, their bare legs swinging beneath the grates.

Ruby knew all about the woman. "Two years ago," she said, "I was eleven, and my grandmother was sick. The first doctor said it was her heart. He told us she'd die in three months. But the second doctor said she was strong enough to recover. He thought she could live for two years."

Below them, a taxi squealed across Rivington. Ruby turned her head to squint at the East River, green-brown with muck and sewage.

"A Hindu dies at home," she said. "They should be surrounded by family. Even Papa's relatives in India wanted to come, but what could we tell them? Stay for two years? Then Papa

heard of the *rishika*. He went to see her, and she gave him a date—the date Dadi was to die. We put Dadi’s bed in the front room, with her head facing east. We lit a lamp and kept vigil: praying, singing hymns. Papa’s brothers flew from Chandigarh. I sat on the floor with my cousins. There were twenty of us, maybe more. When Dadi died on May 16th, just like the *rishika* said, we cried with relief.”

“You weren’t mad?”

“Why would we be mad?”

“That the woman didn’t save your grandma,” Varya said. “That she didn’t make her better.”

“The *rishika* gave us a chance to say goodbye. We can never repay her for that.” Ruby picked the last crumbs of kugel out of the foil, then folded it in half. “Anyway, she couldn’t make Dadi better. She knows things, the *rishika*, but she can’t stop them. She isn’t God.”

“Where is she now?” asked Varya. “Daniel heard she’s staying in a building on Hester Street, but he doesn’t know which.”

“I wouldn’t know, either. She stays in a different place every time. For her safety.”

Inside the Singh’s apartment, there was a high-pitched crash and the sound of someone shouting in Hindi.

Ruby stood, brushing the crumbs off her skirt.

“What do you mean, her safety?” asked Varya, standing too.

“There are always people going after a woman like that,” Ruby said. “Who knows what she knows.”

“Rubina!” called Ruby’s mother.

“I gotta go.” Ruby hopped through the window and pushed it shut behind her, leaving Varya to take the fire escape down to the fourth floor.

Varya was surprised that word of the woman had spread so far, but not everyone had heard of her. When she mentioned the seer to the men who worked the counter at Katz’s, their arms tattooed with numbers, they stared at her with fear.

“Kids,” said one of them. “Why would you wanna get mixed up with something like that?”

His voice was sharp, as though Varya had personally insulted him. She left with her sandwich, flustered, and did not bring the subject up again.

#

In the end, the same boys Daniel originally overheard gave him the woman’s address. He saw them that weekend on the walking path of the Williamsburg Bridge, smoking dope while they leaned against the railing. They were older than he—fourteen, maybe—and he forced himself to confess his eavesdropping before he asked if they knew anything else.

The boys didn’t seem to be bothered. They readily offered the number of the apartment building where the woman was said to be staying, though they didn’t know how to make an appointment. The rumor, they told Daniel, was that you had to bring an offering. Some claimed it was cash, but others said the woman already had all the money she needed and that you had to get creative. One boy brought a bloody squirrel he found on the side of the road, picked up with tongs and delivered in a tied-off plastic bag. But Varya argued that nobody would want that,

even a fortune teller, so in the end they collected their allowances in the drawstring bag and hoped that would be enough.

When Klara wasn't home, Varya retrieved *The Book of Divination* from beneath Klara's bed and climbed into her own. She lay on her stomach to sound out the words: haruspicy (by the livers of sacrificed animals), ceromancy (by patterns in wax), rhabdomancy (by rods). On cool days, breeze from the window ruffled the family trees and old photos she keeps taped to wall beside her bed. Through these documents, she tracks the mysterious, underground brokering of traits: genes flicking on and off and on again, her grandfather Lev's rangy legs skipping Saul for Daniel.

Lev came to New York on a steamship with his father, a cloth merchant, after his mother was killed in the pogroms of 1905. At Ellis Island, they were tested for disease and interrogated in English while they stared at the fist of the iron woman who watched, impassive, from the sea they had just crossed. Lev's father repaired sewing machines; Lev worked in a garment factory run by a German Jew who allowed him to observe the Sabbath. Lev became an assistant manager, then a manager. In 1930, he opened his own business—Gold's Tailor and Dressmaking—in a basement apartment on Hester Street.

Varya was named for her father's mother, who worked as Lev's bookkeeper until their retirement. She knows less about her maternal grandparents—only that her grandmother was named Klara, like Varya's younger sister, and that she arrived from Hungary in 1913. But she died when Varya's mother, Gertie, was only six, and Gertie rarely speaks of her. Once, Klara and Varya snuck into Gertie's bedroom and scoured it for traces of their grandparents. Like dogs, they smelled the mystery that surrounded this pair, the whiff of intrigue and shame, and they nosed their way to the chest of drawers where Gertie keeps her underclothes. In the top drawer,

they found a small wooden box, lacquered and gold-hinged. Inside was a yellowed stack of photographs that showed a small, puckish woman with short black hair and heavily-lidded eyes. In the first photo, she stood in a skirted leotard with one hip cocked to the side, holding a cane above her head. In another, she rode a horse, bent over backward with her midriff showing. In the photo Varya and Klara liked best, the woman was suspended in midair, hanging from a rope that she held in her teeth.

Two things told them this woman was their grandmother. The first was a wrinkled old photo, greased with fingerprints, in which the same woman stood with a tall man and a small child. Varya and Klara knew the child was their mother, even at this reduced size: she held her parents' hands in her small, fat fists, and her face was squeezed into an expression of consternation that Gertie still frequently wore.

Klara claimed the box and its contents.

"It belongs to me," she said. "I got her name. Ma never looks at it, anyway."

But they soon found that was not true. The morning after Klara secreted the lacquered box back to the bedroom and tucked it beneath her bottom bunk, a caw came from their parents' room, followed by Gertie's heated interrogations and Saul's muffled denial. Moments later, Gertie burst into the bunk room.

"Who took it?" she cried. "Who?"

Her nostrils flared, and her wide hips blocked the light that usually spilled in from the hallway. Klara was hot with fear, nearly crying. When Saul left for work and Gertie stalked into the kitchen, Klara snuck into her parents' room and put the box exactly where she'd found it. But when the apartment was empty, Varya knew that Klara returned to the photos and the tiny

woman inside them. She stared at the woman's intensity, her glamour, and vowed she'd live up to her namesake.

#

"Don't look around like that," Daniel hisses. "Act like you belong."

The Golds hurry up the stairs. The walls are covered in chipped, beige paint, and the hallways are dark. When they reach the fifth floor, Daniel pauses.

"What do you suggest we do now?" whispers Varya. She likes it when Daniel is stumped.

"We wait," says Daniel. "For someone to come out."

But Varya doesn't want to wait. She's jittery, filled with unexpected dread, and she starts down the hallway alone.

She thought that magic would be detectable, but the doors on this floor look exactly the same, with their scratched brass knobs and numbers. The four in number fifty-four has fallen sideways. When Varya walks toward the door, she hears the sound of a television or a radio: the baseball game. Assuming that a *rishika* would not care about baseball, she steps back again.

Her siblings have floated apart. Daniel stands near the stairwell with his hands in his pockets, watching the doors. Simon joins Varya at number fifty-four, rises onto his tip-toes and pushes the four back into place with his index finger. Klara has been wandering in the opposite direction, but now she comes to stand with them. She is followed by the scent of Breck Gold Formula, a product Klara bought with weeks of allowance; the rest of the family uses Prell, which comes in a plastic tube like toothpaste and squirts jelly the color of kelp. Though Varya

scoffs outwardly—*she* would never spend so much on shampoo—she is secretly envious of Klara, who smells like rosemary and oranges, and who now raises her hand to knock.

“What are you doing?” whispers Daniel. “That could be anyone. It could be—”

“Yeah?”

The voice that comes from behind the door is low in pitch and gruff.

“We’re here to see the woman,” Klara tries.

Silence. Varya holds her breath. There is a peephole in the door, smaller than a pencil eraser.

On the other side of the door, a throat is cleared.

“One at a time,” the voice says.

Varya catches Daniel’s eye. They have not prepared to separate. But before they can negotiate, a bolt is pushed to one side, and Klara—what is she thinking?—steps through.

#

Nobody is sure how long Klara is inside. To Varya, it feels like hours. She sits against the wall with her knees to her chest. She is thinking of fairytales: witches who take children, witches who eat them. A tree of panic sprouts in her stomach and grows until the door cracks open.

Varya scrambles to her feet, but Daniel is faster. It’s impossible to see inside the apartment, but Varya hears music—a mariachi band?—and the clang of a pot on a burner.

Before Daniel pushes the door shut, he looks at Varya and Simon. “Don’t worry,” he says.

But they do.

“Where’s Klara?” asks Simon, once Daniel is gone. “Why didn’t she come back out?”

“She must be inside,” says Varya, though the same question has occurred to her. “They’ll probably be there when we go in, Klara and Daniel both. They’re probably just... waiting for us.”

“This was a bad idea.” Simon’s blond curls are matted with sweat. Because Varya is the oldest and Simon the youngest, she feels that she should be able to mother him, but Simon is an enigma to her; only Klara seems to understand him. He talks less than the others. At dinner, he sits with his brow furrowed and his eyes glazed. But he has a rabbit’s speed and agility. Sometimes, while walking beside him to synagogue, Varya finds herself alone. She knows that Simon has only run ahead or dropped behind, but each time, it feels like he’s disappeared through a crack she can’t see.

When the door opens again, that same fraction of an inch, Varya puts a hand on his shoulder. “It’s all right, Sy. You go ahead, and I’ll stand lookout. Okay?”

For what or whom, she isn’t sure—the hallway is just as empty as it was when they arrived. Really, Varya is timid: despite being the oldest, she’d rather let the others go first. But Simon seems comforted. He brushes a curl out of his eyes before he leaves her.

#

Alone, Varya’s panic swells. She feels cut off from her siblings, as if she is standing on shore, watching their ships float away. She should have stopped them from coming. By the time the door opens again, sweat has pooled above her upper lip and in the waistband of her skirt. But

it's too late to leave the way she came in, and her siblings are waiting. Varya puts her hand to the door and pushes it all the way open.

She finds herself in a tiny efficiency filled with so many belongings that at first she sees no person at all. Books are stacked on the floor like model skyscrapers. The kitchen shelves have been stuffed with newspapers instead of food, and non-perishables are clumped along the counter: crackers, cereal, canned soups, a dozen bright varieties of tea. There are tarot cards and playing cards, astrological charts and calendars—Varya recognizes one in Chinese, another with Roman numerals, and a third that shows the phases of the moon. There is a yellowed poster of the I-Ching, whose hexagrams she remembers from Klara's *Book of Divination*; a vase filled with sand; gongs and copper bowls; a laurel wreath; a pile of twig-like wooden sticks, carved with horizontal lines; and a bowl of stones, some of which have been tied to long pieces of string.

Only a nook by the door has been cleared. There, a folding table sits between two folding chairs. Beside it, a smaller table has been set with red cloth roses and an open bible. Two white plaster elephants are arranged around the bible, along with a prayer candle, a wooden cross, and three statues: one of the Buddha, one of the Virgin Mary, and one of Nefertiti, which Varya knows because of a small, handwritten sign that reads, "NEFERTITI."

Varya feels a pang of guilt. In Hebrew school, she heard the case against idols, listening solemnly as Rabbi Chaim read from the Tractate Avodah Zarah. Her parents wouldn't want her to be here. But didn't God make the fortune teller, just as He made Varya's parents? In synagogue, Varya tries to pray, but God never seems to respond. The *rishika*, at least, will talk back.

The woman stands at the sink, shaking loose tea into a delicate metal ball. She wears a wide cotton dress, a pair of leather sandals and a navy blue headscarf; her long, brown hair hangs in two slender braids. Though she is large, her movements are elegant and precise.

“Where are my siblings?” Varya’s voice is throaty, and she is embarrassed by the desperation she hears in it.

The blinds are drawn. The woman pulls a mug from the top shelf and places the metal ball inside it.

“I want to know,” Varya says, more loudly, “where my siblings are.”

A kettle whistles on the stovetop. The woman turns off the burner and lifts the kettle above the mug. Water pours out in a thick, clear cord, and the room fills with the smell of grass.

“Outside,” she says.

“No, they’re not. I waited in the hall, and they never came out.”

The woman steps toward Varya. Her cheeks are doughy and her nose bulbous, her lips puckered like a drawstring purse. Her skin is golden-brown, like Ruby Singh’s.

“I can’t do nothing if you don’t trust me,” she says. “Take off your shoes. Then you can sit down.”

Chastised, Varya slips off her saddle shoes and places them next to the door. Perhaps the woman is right. If Varya refuses to trust her, this trip will be for nothing, along with all they’ve risked for it: their father’s gaze, their mother’s displeasure, four sets of saved-up allowance. She sits at the folding table; the woman sets the mug of tea before her. Varya thinks of tinctures and poisons, of Rip Van Winkle and his twenty-year sleep. Then she thinks of Ruby. *She knows things, the rishika*, Ruby said. *We can never repay her for that*. Varya lifts the mug and sips.

The *rishika* sits in the folding chair across from Varya. She scans Varya's rigid shoulders, her damp hands, her face.

"You haven't been feeling so good, have you, honey?"

Varya swallows in surprise. She shakes her head.

"You been waitin' to feel better?"

Varya is still, though her pulse runs.

"You worry," says the woman, nodding. "You got troubles. You smile on your face, you laugh, but in your heart, you're not happy; you're alone. Am I right?"

Varya's mouth trembles its assent. Her heart is so full she feels it might crack.

"That's a shame," says the woman. "We got work to do." She snaps her fingers and gestures to Varya's left hand. "Your palm."

Varya scoots to the edge of her chair and offers her hand to the *rishika*, whose own hands are nimble and cool. Her breath is shallow. Varya can't remember the last time she touched a stranger; she prefers to keep a membrane, like a raincoat, between herself and other people. When she returns from school, where the desks are oily with fingerprints and the playground contaminated by kindergarteners, she washes her hands until they're nearly raw.

"Can you really do it?" she asks. "Do you know when I'll die?"

She is frightened by the capriciousness of luck: the plain-colored tablets that can expand your mind or turn it upside down; the men randomly chosen and shipped to Cam Rahn Bay and the mountain Dong Ap Bia, in whose bamboo thickets and twelve-foot elephant grass a thousand men were, in May, found dead. She has a classmate at P.S. 42, Eugene Bogopolski, whose three brothers were sent to Vietnam when Varya and Eugene were only nine. All three of them returned, and the Bogopolskis threw a party in their Broome Street apartment. The next year,

Eugene dove into a swimming pool, hit his head on the concrete and died. Varya's date of death would be one thing—perhaps the most important thing—she could know for sure.

The woman looks at Varya. Her eyes are bright, black marbles.

“I can help you,” she says. “I can do you good.”

She turns to Varya's palm, looking first at its general shape, then at the blunt, square fingers. Gently, she tugs Varya's thumb backward; it doesn't bend far before resisting. She examines the space between Varya's fourth and fifth fingers. She squeezes the tip of Varya's pinky.

“What are you looking for?” Varya asks.

“Your character. Ever heard of Heraclitus?” Varya shakes her head. “Greek philosopher. *Character is fate*—that's what he said. They're bound up, those two, like brothers and sisters. You wanna know the future?” She points at Varya with her free hand. “Look in the mirror.”

“And what if I change?” It seems impossible that Varya's future is already inside her like an actress just offstage, waiting decades to leave the wings.

“Then you'd be special. 'Cause most people don't.”

The *rishika* turns Varya's hand over and sets it down on the table.

“January 21st, 2044.” Her voice is matter-of-fact, as if she is stating the temperature, or the winner of the ballgame. “You got plenty of time.”

For a moment, Varya's heart unlatches and lifts. 2044 would make her 88, an altogether decent age to die. Then she pauses.

“How do you know?”

“What did I say about you trusting me?” The *rishika* raises a furry eyebrow and frowns.

“Now, I want you to go home and think about what I said. If you do that, you're gonna feel

better. But don't tell anybody, all right? What it shows in your hand, what I told you—that's between you and me."

The woman stares at Varya, and Varya stares back. Now that Varya is the appraiser and not the person appraised, something curious happens. The woman's eyes lose their luster, her movements their elegance. It is too good, the fortune Varya has been given, and her good fortune becomes proof of the seer's fraudulence: probably, she gives the same prediction to everyone. Varya thinks of the Wizard of Oz. Like him, this woman is no mage and no seer. She is a swindler, a con artist. Varya stands.

"My brother should have paid you," she says.

The woman rises, too. She walks toward what Varya thought was the door to a closet—a bra hangs from the handle, its mesh cups long as the nets Varya uses to catch monarchs in summer—but no: it's an exit. The woman cracks the door, and Varya sees a strip of red brick, a thatch of fire escape. When she hears the voices of her siblings drift up from below, her heart balloons.

But the *rishika* stands before her like a barrier. She pinches Varya's arm.

"Everything is gonna come out okay for you, honey." There is something threatening in her tone, as if it is urgent that Varya hear this, urgent that she believe it. "Everything is gonna work out okay."

Between the woman's fingers, Varya's skin turns white.

"Let me go," she says.

She is surprised by the coldness in her voice. In the woman's face, a curtain yanks shut. She releases Varya and steps aside.

#

Varya clangs down the stairs of the fire escape in her saddle shoes. A breeze strokes her arms and ruffles the downy, light brown hair that has begun to appear on her legs. When she reaches the alley, she sees that Klara's cheeks are streaked with saltwater, her nose bright pink.

"What's wrong?"

Klara whirls. "What do you think?"

"Oh, but you can't actually believe..." Varya looks to Daniel for help, but he is stony.

"Whatever she said to you—it doesn't mean anything. She made it up. Right, Daniel?"

"Right." Daniel turns and begins to walk toward the street. "Let's go."

Klara pulls Simon up by one arm. He still holds the drawstring bag, which is as full as it was when they came.

"You were supposed to pay her," Varya says.

"I forgot," says Simon.

"She doesn't deserve our money." Daniel stands on the sidewalk with his hands on his hips. "Come on!"

They are quiet on the walk home. Varya has never felt further from the others. At dinner, she picks at her brisket, but Simon doesn't eat at all.

"What is it, my sweet?" asks Gertie.

"Not hungry."

"Why not?"

Simon shrugs. His blonde curls are white beneath the overhead light.

"Eat the food your mother has prepared," says Saul.

But Simon refuses. He sits on his hands.

“What is it, hm?” clucks Gertie, one eyebrow raised. “Not good enough for you?”

“Leave him alone.” Klara reaches over to ruffle Simon’s curls, but he jerks away and pushes his chair back with a screech.

“I hate you!” he cries, standing. “I! Hate! *All of you!*”

“Simon,” says Saul, standing too. He still wears the suit he wore to work. His hair is thinning and lighter than Gertie’s, an unusual coppery blond. “You do not speak to your family that way.”

He is wooden in this role. Gertie has always been the disciplinarian. Now, she only gapes.

“But I do,” says Simon. There is wonder in his face.

Part One

YOU'D DANCE, KID

1978 – 1982

Simon

1.

When Saul dies, Simon is in Physics class, drawing concentric circles meant to represent the rings of an electron shell but which to Simon mean nothing at all. With his daydreaming and his dyslexia, he has never been a good student, and the purpose of the electron shell—the orbit of electrons around an atom's nucleus—escapes him. In this moment, his father bends over in the crosswalk on Broome Street while walking back from lunch. A taxi honks to a stop; Saul sinks to his knees; the blood drains from his heart. His death makes no more sense to Simon than the transfer of electrons from one atom to another: both are there one moment, and gone the next.

Varya drives down from college at Vassar, Daniel from SUNY Binghamton. None of them understand it. Yes, Saul was stressed, but the city's worst moments—the fiscal crisis, the blackout—are finally behind them. The unions saved the city from bankruptcy, and New York is finally looking up. At the hospital, Varya asks about her father's last moments. Had he been in any pain? Only briefly, says the nurse. Did he speak? No one can say that he did. This should not surprise his wife and children, who are used to his long silences—and yet Simon feels cheated, robbed of a final memory of his father, who remains as close-lipped in death as he was in life.

Because the next day is Shabbat, the funeral takes place on Sunday. They meet at Congregation Tifereth Israel, the conservative synagogue of which Saul was a member and patron. In the entryway, Rabbi Chaim gives each Gold a pair of scissors for the *kriah*.

“No. I won’t do it,” says Gertie, who must be walked through each step of the funeral as if through the customs process of a country she never meant to visit. She wears a sheath dress that Saul made just for her in 1962: sturdy black cotton, with a dart-fitted waistline, front button closure and detachable belt. “You can’t make me,” she adds, her eyes darting between Rabbi Chaim and her children, who have all obediently slit their clothes above the heart, and though Rabbi Chaim explains that it is not *he* who can make her but God, it seems that God can’t, either. In the end, the rabbi gives Gertie a black ribbon to cut, and she takes her seat with wounded victory.

Simon has never liked coming here. As a child, he thought the synagogue was haunted, with its rough, dark stone and dank interior. Worse were the services: the unending silent devotion, the fervent pleas for the restoration of Zion. Now Simon stands before the closed casket, air circulating through the slit in his shirt, and realizes he’ll never see his father’s face again. He pictures Saul’s distant eyes and demure, almost feminine smile. Rabbi Chaim calls Saul magnanimous, a person of character and fortitude, but to Simon he was a decorous, timid man who skirted conflict and trouble—a man who seemed to do so little out of passion that it was a wonder he had ever married Gertie, for no one would have viewed Simon’s mother, with her ambition and pendulum moods, as a pragmatic choice.

After the service, they follow the pallbearers to Mount Hebron Cemetery, where Saul’s parents were buried. Both girls are weeping—Varya silently, Klara as loudly as her mother—and Daniel seems to be holding himself together out of nothing more than stunned obligation. But

Simon finds himself unable to cry, even as the casket is lowered into the earth. He feels only loss, not of the father he knew but of the person, unbeknownst to Simon, that Saul might have been. At dinner, they sat at opposite ends of the table, lost in private thought. The shock came when one of them glanced up, and their eyes caught—an accident, but one that joined their separate worlds like a hinge before someone looked away again.

Now, there is no hinge. Distant though he was, Saul had allowed each Gold to assume their separate roles: he the breadwinner, Gertie the General, Varya the obedient oldest, Simon the unburdened youngest. If their father's body—placid and seemingly healthy, his cholesterol lower than Gertie's, his heart nothing if not steady—had simply *stopped*, what else could go wrong? Which other laws might warp? Varya hides in her bunk. Daniel is twenty, barely a man, but he greets guests and lays out food, leads prayers in Hebrew. Klara, whose portion of the bedroom is messier than everyone else's, scrubs the kitchen until her biceps hurt. And Simon takes care of Gertie.

This is not their usual arrangement, for Gertie has always babied Simon more than the others. She wanted, once, to be an intellectual; she lay beside the fountain in Washington Square Park reading Kafka and Nietzsche and Proust. But at nineteen, she met Saul, who had joined his father's business after high school, and she was pregnant by twenty. Soon Gertie withdrew from New York University, where she was on scholarship, and moved into an apartment mere blocks from Gold's Tailor and Dressmaking, which Saul would inherit when his parents retired to Kew Gardens Hills.

Shortly after Varya was born—far sooner than Saul thought necessary, and to his embarrassment—Gertie became the receptionist at a law firm. At night, she was still their formidable captain. But in the morning, she put on a dress and applied rouge from a little round

box before depositing the children at Mrs. Almendinger's, after which she exited the building with as much lightness as she had ever been capable. When Simon was born, though, Gertie stayed home for nine months instead of five, which turned into eighteen. She carried him everywhere. When he cried, she did not respond with bullish frustration, but nuzzled him and sang, as if nostalgic for an experience she had always resented because she knew she would not repeat it. Shortly after Simon's birth, while Saul was at work, she went to the doctor's office and returned with a small glass pill bottle—*Envoid*, it read—that she kept in the back of her underwear drawer.

“Si-mon!” she calls now, in a rich long blast like a foghorn. “Hand me that,” she might say, lying in bed and pointing to a pillow just past her feet. Or, in a low, ominous tone: “I have a sore; I’ve been lying too long in this bed,” and though Simon internally recoils, he examines the thick wedge of her heel. “That isn’t a *sore*, Ma,” he replies. “It’s a blister,” but by then she has moved on, asking him to bring her the Kaddish, or fish and chocolate from the shiva platter delivered by Rabbi Chaim.

Simon might think Gertie takes pleasure in commanding him, if not for the way she weeps at night—snuffled, so her children don’t hear, though Simon does—or the times he sees her curled fetal on the bed she shared with Saul for two decades, looking like the teenager she was when she met him. She sits shiva with a devoutness Simon did not know she could muster, for Gertie has always believed in superstition more than any God. She spits three times when a funeral goes by, throws salt if the shaker falls over and never passed a cemetery while pregnant, which required the family to endure constant rerouting between 1956 and 1962. Each Friday, she observes the Sabbath with effortful patience, as if the Sabbath is a guest she can’t wait to get rid of. But this week, she wears no makeup. She avoids jewelry and leather shoes. As if in penitence

for the failed *kriah*, she wears her black sheath day and night, ignoring the crust of brisket drippings on one thigh. Because the Golds own no wooden stools, she sits on the floor to recite the Kaddish and even tries to read the Book of Job, squinting as she holds the *Tanakh* up to her face. When she sets it down, she appears wild-eyed and lost, like a child in search of her own parents, and then comes the call—“*Si-mon!*”—for something tangible: fresh fruit or pound cake, a window opened for air or closed against draft, a blanket, a washcloth, a candle.

When enough guests have assembled for a minyan, Simon helps her into a dress and house slippers, and she emerges to pray. They’re joined by Saul’s longtime employees: the bookkeepers, the seamstresses, the pattern makers, the salesmen and Saul’s junior partner, Arthur Milavetz, a reedy, beakish man of thirty-two.

As a child, Simon loved to visit his father’s shop. The bookkeepers gave him paper clips to play with, or pieces of scrap fabric, and Simon was proud to be Saul’s son—it was clear, by the reverence with which the staff treated him and by his large windowed office, that he was someone important. He bounced Simon on one knee as he demonstrated how to cut patterns and sew samples. Later, Simon accompanied him to fabric houses, where Saul selected the silks and tweeds that would be fashionable next season, and to Saks Fifth Avenue, whose latest styles he purchased to make knock-offs at the shop. After work, Simon was allowed to stay while the men played hearts or sat in Saul’s office with a box of cigars, debating the teachers’ strike and the sanitation strike, the Suez Canal and the Yom Kippur War.

All the while, something loomed larger, closer, until Simon was forced to see it in all its terrible majesty: his future. Daniel had always planned to be a doctor, which left one son—Simon, impatient and uncomfortable in his skin, let alone in a double-breasted suit. By the time he was a teenager, the women’s clothing bored him and the wools made him itch. He resented

the tenuousness of Saul's attention, which he sensed would not last his departure from the business, if such a thing were even possible. He bristled at Arthur, who was always at his father's side, and who treated Simon like a helpful little dog. Most of all, he felt something far more confusing: that the shop was Saul's true home, and that his employees knew him better than his children ever did.

Today, Arthur brings three deli platters and a tray of smoked fish. He bends his long, swannish neck to kiss Gertie's cheek.

"What will we do, Arthur?" she asks, her mouth in his coat.

"It's terrible," he says. "It's horrific."

Tiny droplets of spring rain perch on Arthur's shoulders and on the lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses, but his eyes are sharp.

"Thank God for you. And for Simon," Gertie says.

#

On the last night of shiva, while Gertie sleeps, the siblings take to the attic. They're worn down, washed-out, with bleary, baggy eyes and curdled stomachs. The shock still hasn't faded; Simon cannot imagine it ever fading. Daniel and Varya sit on an orange velvet couch, stuffing spurring from the armrests. Klara takes the patchwork ottoman that once belonged to now-dead Mrs. Blumenstein. She pours bourbon into four chipped teacups. Simon hunches cross-legged on the floor, swirling the amber liquid with his finger.

"So, what's the plan?" he asks, glancing at Daniel and Varya. "You're heading out tomorrow?"

Daniel nods. He and Varya will catch early trains back to school. They've already said goodbye to Gertie and promised to return in a month, when their exams are finished.

"I can't take any more time off if I'm going to pass," Daniel says. "Some of us"—he nudges Klara with his foot—"worry about that sort of thing."

Klara's senior year ends in two weeks, but she's already told her family she won't walk at graduation. ("All those penguins, shuffling around in unison? It's not me.") Varya is studying biology and Daniel hopes to be a military doctor, but Klara doesn't want to go to college. She wants to do magic.

She's spent the past nine years under the tutelage of Ilya Hlavacek, an aging vaudevillian and sleight-of-hand magician who is also her boss at Ilya's Magic & Co. Klara first learned of the shop at the age of nine, when she purchased *The Book of Divination* from Ilya; now, he is as much a father to her as Saul. A Czech immigrant who came of age between the Great Wars, Ilya—seventy-nine, stooped and arthritic, with a troll's tuft of white hair—tells fantastic tales of his stage years: one he spent touring the Midwest's grimmest dime museums, his card table mere feet from rows of pickled human heads; the Pennsylvania circus tent in which he successfully vanished a brown Sicilian donkey named Antonio as one thousand onlookers burst with applause.

But over a century has passed since the Davenport brothers invoked spirits in the salons of the wealthy and John Nevil Maskelyne made a woman levitate in London's Egyptian Theater. Today, the luckiest of America's magicians manage theatrical special effects or work elaborate shows in Las Vegas. Almost all of them are men. When Klara visited Marinka's, the oldest magic shop in the country, the young man at the register glanced up with disdain before directing her to a bookshelf marked Witchcraft. ("Bastard," Klara muttered, though she did buy

Demonology: The Blood Summonings just to watch him squirm.)

Besides, Klara is drawn less to stage magicians—the bright lights and evening clothes, the wire-rigged levitations—than to those who perform in more modest venues, where magic is handed from person to person like a crumpled dollar bill. On Sundays, she watches the street magician Jeff Sheridan at his usual post by the Walter Scott statue in Central Park. But could she really make a living that way? New York is changing, anyway. In her neighborhood, the hippies have been replaced by hardcore kids, the drugs by harder drugs. Puerto Rican gangs hold court at 12th and A. Once, Klara was held up by men who probably would have done worse if Daniel had not happened to walk by at exactly that moment.

Varya ashes into an empty teacup. “I can’t believe you’re still going to leave. With Ma like this.”

“That was always the plan, Varya. I was always going to leave.”

“Well, sometimes plans change. Sometimes they have to.”

Klara raises an eyebrow. “So why don’t you change yours?”

“I can’t. I have exams.”

Varya’s hands are rigid, her back straight. She has always been uncompromising, sanctimonious, someone who walks between the lines as if on a balance beam. On her fourteenth birthday, she blew out all but three candles, and Simon, just eight, stood on his tiptoes to do the rest. Varya yelled at him and cried so intensely that even Saul and Gertie were puzzled. She has none of Klara’s beauty, no interest in clothing or makeup. Her one indulgence is her hair. It is waist-length and has never been colored or dyed, not because Varya’s natural color—the dusty, light brown of dirt in summer—is in any way remarkable; she simply prefers it as it has always been. Klara dyes her hair a vivid, drugstore red. Whenever she does her roots, the sink looks

bloody for days.

“Exams,” Klara says, waving a hand, as if exams are a hobby that Varya should have outgrown.

“And where do you plan to go?” asks Daniel.

“I haven’t decided.” Klara speaks coolly, but her features are tense.

“Good lord.” Varya drops her head back. “You don’t even have a plan?”

“I’m waiting,” says Klara. “For it to be revealed to me.”

Simon looks at his sister. He knows she’s terrified about her future. He also knows she hides it effectively.

“And once it’s revealed to you,” says Daniel, “this place you’re going. How will you get there? Are you waiting for that to be revealed to you, too? You don’t have the money for a car. You don’t have the money for a plane ticket.”

“There’s this new thing called hitchhiking, Danny.” Klara is the only one who calls Daniel by his childhood nickname, knowing it calls up memories of bed-wetting and buck teeth and, most of all, a family trip to Lavallette, New Jersey during which he could not help but shit his corduroys, ruining the first day of the Golds’ vacation and the backseat of their rented Chevy. “All the cool kids are doing it.”

“Klara, please.” Varya’s head snaps forward. “Promise me you aren’t going to hitchhike. Across the country? You’ll be killed.”

“I won’t be *killed*.” Klara takes a drag and blows smoke to the left, away from Varya. “But if it means that much to you, I’ll take a Greyhound.”

“That’ll take days,” says Daniel.

“Cheaper than the train. And besides. Do you really think Ma needs me? She’s happier

when I'm not around." The revelation that Klara would not be applying to college was followed by long screaming matches between her and Gertie, which gave way to bitter silence. "Anyway, she won't be alone. Sy'll be here."

She reaches for Simon, gives his knee a squeeze.

"That doesn't bother you, Simon?" Daniel asks.

It does. He can already see how it will be when everyone else is gone, he and Gertie trapped alone inside a never-ending shiva—"Si-mon!"—his father nowhere and everywhere at once. Nights when he'll sneak out to run, needing to be anywhere but home. And the business—of course, the business—which is now rightfully his. Equally bad is the thought of losing Klara, his ally, but for her sake, he shrugs.

"Nah. Klara should do what she wants. We got one life, right?"

"Far as we know." Klara snuffs out her cigarette. "Don't you guys ever think about it?"

Daniel raises his eyebrows. "About the afterlife?"

"No," says Klara. "About how long yours'll be."

Now that the box has been opened, quiet falls in the attic.

"Not that old bitch again," Daniel says.

Klara flinches, as if it's she who's been insulted. They have not discussed the woman on Hester Street in years. Tonight, though, she's drunk. Simon sees it in the glaze of her eyes, the way her s's slosh together.

"You guys are cowards," she says. "You can't even admit it."

"Admit what?" asks Daniel.

"What she told you." Klara points a finger at him, the nail painted with chipping red polish. "Come on, Daniel. I dare you."

“No.”

“Coward.” Klara grins crookedly, closing her eyes.

“I couldn’t tell you if I wanted to,” says Daniel. “It was years ago—it was a *decade* ago.

Do you honestly think I committed it to memory?”

“I did,” says Varya. “January 21st, 2044. So there.”

She takes a swig of her drink, then another, and puts the empty teacup on the ground.

Klara looks at her sisters with surprise. Then she grabs the bottle of bourbon by the neck with one hand and refills Varya’s cup before her own.

“What’s that?” asks Simon. “Eighty-eight years old?”

Varya nods.

“Congratulations.” Klara closes her eyes. “She told me I’d die at thirty-one.”

Daniel clears his throat. “Well, that’s bullshit.”

Klara raises her glass. “Here’s hoping.”

“Fine.” Daniel drains his own. “November 24th, 2006. You beat me, V.”

“Forty-eight,” Klara says. “You worried?”

“Not at all. I’m sure that hag said the first thing that came to mind. I’d be a fool to put any stock in it.” He puts his cup down; it rattles on the wood plank. “What about you, Sy?”

Simon is on his seventh cigarette. He takes a drag and exhales the smoke, keeping his eyes on the wall. “Young.”

“How young?” Klara asks.

“My business.”

“Oh, come on,” says Varya. “This is ridiculous. She only has power over us if we let her—and it’s obvious she was a fraud. Eighty-eight? Please. With a prophecy like that, I’ll

probably be hit by a truck when I'm forty."

"Then how come all the rest of ours were so bad?" asks Simon.

"I don't know. Variety? She can't tell everyone the same thing." Varya's face is flushed.

"I'm sorry we ever went to see her. The only thing she did was lodge the idea in our heads."

"It's Daniel's fault," says Klara. "He made us go."

"Don't you think I know that?" hisses Daniel. "Besides, you were the first one to agree."

Fury blooms in Simon's chest. For a moment, he hates them all: Varya, rational and distant, a lifetime ahead; Daniel, who staked his claim to medicine years ago, forcing Simon to carry Gold's; Klara, abandoning him now. He hates that they get to escape.

"Guys!" he says. "Stop it! Just shut up, okay? Dad is dead. So can you fucking shut up?"

He's surprised by the authority in his voice. Even Daniel seems to shrink.

"Simon says," says Daniel.

#

Varya and Daniel go downstairs to sleep in their beds, but Klara and Simon go up to the roof. They bring pillows and blankets and fall asleep on the concrete beneath the glow of the smog-veiled moon. They're shaken awake before dawn. At first, they think it's Gertie, but then Varya's thin, drawn face comes into focus.

"We're leaving," she whispers. "The taxi's downstairs."

Daniel looms behind her, his eyes distant behind glasses. The skin below them has a silver-blue, piscine tinge, and the past week has carved deep parentheses around his mouth—or have they always been there?

Klara throws an arm over her face. “No.”

Varya lifts it, smooths Klara’s hair. “Say goodbye.”

Her voice is gentle, and Klara sits up. She wraps her arms around Varya’s neck so tightly she can touch her own elbows.

“Goodbye,” she whispers.

After Varya and Daniel leave, the sky glows red, then amber. Simon presses his face to Klara’s hair. It smells like smoke.

“Don’t go,” he says.

“I have to, Sy.”

“What’s out there for you, anyway?”

“Who knows?” Klara’s eyes are watery with fatigue, and her pupils seem to shine.

“That’s the whole point.”

They stand and fold the blankets together.

“You could come, too,” Klara adds, eyeing him.

Simon laughs. “Yeah, right. Skip out on two more years of school? Ma’d kill me.”

“Not if you got far enough away.”

“I couldn’t.”

Klara walks to the railing and leans against it, still in her blue, fuzzy halter top and cut-off shorts. She isn’t looking at him, but Simon can feel the force of her attention, how she vibrates with it, as if she knows that only by feigning nonchalance can she say what she does next.

“We could go to San Francisco.”

Simon’s breath catches. “Don’t talk like that.”

He crouches to pick up their pillows, stuffing one under each arm. He's 5'8, like Saul was, with swift, muscular legs and a lean chest. His plump, reddish lips and dark blond curls—the contribution of some long-buried, Aryan ancestor—have won him the admiration of the girls in his sophomore class, but this isn't the audience he wants.

Vaginas have never appealed to him: their cabbage-like folds, their long, hidden corridor. He craves the long thrust of the cock, its heady insistence, and the challenge of a body like his. Only Klara has ever known. After their parents fall asleep, she and Simon climb out of the window, mace in Klara's fake leather purse, and take the fire escape down to the street. They go to Le Jardin to hear Bobby Guttadaro play or ride the subway to 12 West, a flower warehouse turned discotheque where Simon met the go-go dancer who told him about San Francisco. They sat in the rooftop garden while the dancer said that San Francisco has a gay city commissioner and a gay newspaper, that gay people can work anywhere and have sex anytime because there are no laws against sodomy. "You can't imagine it," he said, and from then on Simon could do nothing else.

"Why not?" asks Klara, turning now. "Yeah, Ma would be angry. But I see what your life would be like here, Sy, and I don't want that for you. You don't want it, either. Sure, Ma wants me to go to college, but she got that with Danny and V. She has to understand that I'm not her. And you aren't Dad. Jesus—you aren't meant to be a tailor. A tailor!" She paused, as if to let the word sink all the way in. "It's all wrong. And it isn't fair. So give me one reason. Give me one good reason why you shouldn't start your life."

As soon as Simon allows himself to picture it, he is nearly overcome. Manhattan should be an oasis—there are gay clubs, even bathhouses—but he's afraid to reinvent himself in a place that has always been home. "*Faygelehs*," Saul muttered once, glaring at a trio of slender men

unloaded a panoply of instruments into the unit the Singhs could no longer afford. That Yiddish slur was also adopted by Gertie, and though Simon pretended not to hear it, he always felt they were talking about him.

In New York, he would live for them, but in San Francisco, he could live for himself. And though he does not like to think about it, though he in fact avoids the subject pathologically, he allows himself to think it now: What if the woman on Hester Street is right, and the next few years are his last? The mere thought turns his life a different color; it makes everything feel urgent, glittering, precious.

“Jesus, Klara.” Simon joins her at the railing. “But what’s in it for you?”

The sun rises a rich, bloody red, and Klara squints at it.

“You can go one place,” she says. “I can go anywhere.”

She still has the last of her baby fat, and her face is round. Her teeth, when she smiles, are slightly crooked: half feral, half charming. His sister.

“Will I ever find someone I love as much as you?” Simon asks.

“Please.” Klara laughs. “You’ll find someone you love much more.”

Six stories below, a young man runs down Clinton Street. He wears a thin white t-shirt and blue nylon shorts. Simon watches the muscles of his chest undulate beneath the shirt, watches the powerful trunks of his legs do their work. Klara follows his eyes.

“Let’s get out of here,” she says.